



Great jobs for bright people



Improving Student Employability

An ebook for academics to help their students get ready to enter the labour market

Introduction

Higher tuition costs and high unemployment have combined to make students, potential students, employers and society at large question the value of further and higher education. Although academics should never accept the idea that education is only worthwhile if it is of commercial value, we do need to meet these expectations head on.

External pressures may also draw our attention to the issue of employability. The collection of statistics on graduate employment following completion of a course can be used by managers as a pretext for closing courses that they may critique as “ineffective,” or conversely by academics as evidence of validity.

In this ebook, you will be introduced to ideas about employability and examples of how you may be able to enhance the employability of your students.

“Employability is not just about getting a job. Conversely, just because a student is on a vocational course does not mean that somehow employability is automatic. Employability is more than about developing attributes, techniques or experience just to enable a student to get a job, or to progress within a current career. It is about learning and the emphasis is less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner.”

(Harvey, 2003)



Who should read this ebook?

All lecturers and FE/HE staff concerned with improving the rate of graduates moving into paid work commensurate with their education.

This ebook will cover:

- What is “employability”?
- What does current research say about how employability can be improved?
- Key activities to improve student employability
 - Key basic skills
 - Transferable skills: writing, research, initiative, leadership
 - Job-specific skills – the right skills, the right way
 - Identifying and addressing skill gaps
 - Building confidence and leadership ability
 - Help and advice with finding work
 - Work experience, placements and internships
- Can employability be taught?
 - Building employability into the student PDP process
 - Employability modules – are they worth it?
- The other side of employability: Direct work with employers
- Activity: Programme/course employability audit
- Employability: Two university programme case studies
- Overcoming barriers to employability
- Maintaining the employability connection
 - Alumni programmes
 - Continuing Professional Development and bespoke training



What is “employability”?

There are many definitions of “employability.” Indeed, its components may differ widely between areas of work.

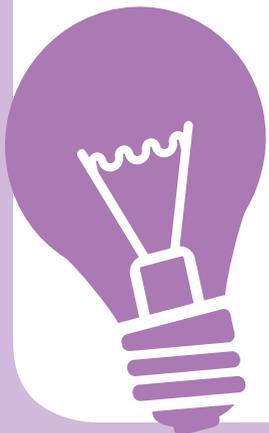
There is a clear set of definable competencies, in terms of things that a person knows how to do or facts that they have committed to memory, in areas like medicine, nursing, law and accountancy. In some other fields, habits of thinking, the ability to take a critical approach to a problem and then choose and implement the right research strategy to solve it, are more important than functional competency or facts.

In addition, no matter how closely allied universities and employers are, there will always be tensions when it comes to competencies, skills and attitudes towards work issues. Employers tend to want things to be done their way, while universities expect students to develop and exercise critical judgment. Either employers or universities may be ahead in terms of technical or theoretical innovation.

Of course, university programme leaders should always keep their finger on the pulse of changes in the field(s) their students hope to seek work in. We need to respond, and often employers need our help as researchers to shape and understand developments. Making sure our students know how to do what will be expected of them – for example, having the ability to use key software packages or analytical tools – is a must if university programmes are to claim relevance to students’ later job success.

When employers talk about employability beyond issues of competency in the field, they usually point towards “soft skills” that they expect students will gain as part of the process of further or higher education. As Lowden et al. (2011) report:

... there is a broad understanding of what qualities, characteristics, skills and knowledge constitute employability both in general, and specifically for graduates. Employers expect graduates to have technical and discipline competences from their degrees but require graduates also to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities.

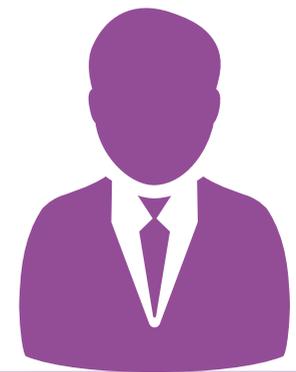


What is “employability”? Cont.

It is important for academics to keep these skills in mind as we write lesson plans, design learning experiences and consider what to assess. A traditional lecture-based curriculum that expects students to participate mostly via answering questions in lectures and that is assessed only via exams and essays will not necessarily foster these attributes. Many can only be built through experience, either real-world or simulated.

Another area often highlighted is development of self-esteem, confidence and student aspirations. These factors cause some students to soar, while others of equal or greater ability may self-limit their achievements (Little, 2011).

Often academics and recruiters alike assume that employability is something that a person “has”: a set of skills and attributes preferred by employers, perhaps. However, a closer examination of employment issues shows that’s not the whole picture. A great deal of research documents that factors outside the applicant’s control, such as social class, race and gender, continue to exert great influence on hiring practices (Pegg, et al., 2012).



What does current research say about how employability can be improved?

Several recent national initiatives have focused on employability, such as the five-year programme run by the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (Butcher et al., 2011) at many UK universities and the ten-year Teaching and Learning Research Programme (Teaching and Learning Research Programme, 2010). These have published extensive results that lecturers can draw on for ideas (see References and Resources, at the back of this ebook page 24).

Ofsted has prepared several reports based on its inspection findings that include advice for the FE sector about improving student employability. The Higher Education Academy also has a focus on employability in HE, and its Web site features a number of very useful research reports.

Although different projects have had different methods and stated goals, there is general agreement across the board that it is possible for FE and HE programmes to improve student employability on a variety of measures. These include basic skills, professional competencies, and other skills and attitudes that have been identified as having an impact (see above). The next section of this ebook will discuss ways this could be done.

In a variety of fields, specific research has been carried out regarding employability, lifelong learning and career trajectories. You should do a literature search on the areas of work your students seek employment in after graduation to find out about studies that can inform improvement. As noted in the Employability Audit section of this ebook, you should also see whether information and advice is available from key employers or employers' associations.



For example, staff at Durham University have researched student destinations for those pursuing History degrees, and ensure that they know how to present their skills favourably to employers in a wide variety of areas.



“ History students at Durham acquire a range of intellectual and general skills which make them very attractive to employers. These skills include: researching, evaluating, organizing and presenting material; clarity and correctness of expression; discrimination and judgement; self-discipline and capacity for extended independent work; appreciation of the validity of the views of others, and imaginative insight...

Helping students to articulate their degree-specific skills in an 'outward-facing' way is at the very centre of our strategic planning as we adapt our curriculum.

We have woven this into our planning and strategy. These skills are woven into much of the work you do in our degree programme. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that our graduates have gone on to successful careers in a wide variety of fields, from the civil service, law, banking and business, to teaching, media, journalism, the military and further study.

(Department of History, University of Durham, 2014)

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Key activities to improve student employability

The North West Graduate Employability Programme, a project co-funded by the European Social Fund and the Department of Work and Pensions, worked with 1800 participants using a wide range of activities to see what appeared to be helpful. The activities most highly rated by participants were:

- Help with CVs
- Being able to have mock interviews with employers
- Help identifying skills gaps
- Confidence building activities
- Spending time in a business or organisation on placement
- Being able to shadow a professional person in their job
- Help researching the jobs market
- Practising presentation skills
- More information about jobs
- Personal support

(Goodwin, 2012)

Additional research has identified other areas where students could benefit from activities encouraging them to explore issues or develop skills, such as effective interpersonal communication (Rosenberg et al., 2012).

Employers have also identified key basic skills that they expect all employees to be able to use in context: literacy, numeracy and ICT. It is relatively easy for lecturers to embed these into module outcomes and corresponding marking criteria for existing assessments.

Many of the areas on the ESF list, however, are additional to traditional academic work. It would be wrong to rely on university Careers services for these, although these may be good allies to work with. For one thing, many students never access the Careers service – particularly part-time and mature students.

Can employability be taught?

Although the consensus seems to be that employability can be taught, at least to some extent, there is not agreement on exactly how. Universities have taken quite varied approaches.

1 Building employability into the student PDP process

Many universities now incorporate employability-focused questions or topics into materials used in student Personal Development Planning sessions. These are no doubt useful for identifying areas of need; for example, a student may note that doing presentations is an area they find difficult, and this could trigger finding resources to improve that skill.

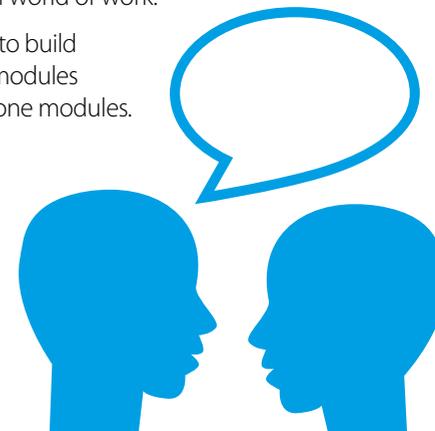
Areas that could be fairly easily included are key skills checks, ensuring that the student has an updated CV that is fit for purpose, and directing students towards conference and job fair attendance and membership in relevant organisations,

However, most students do not tend to engage much with the PDP process when it is an unassessed extra activity, so it may not be the best forum for these discussions.

2 Employability modules – are they worth it?

In the North West Graduate Employability Programme, participants rated employability awards, modules and coursework lowest, indicating that students would prefer activities that took them out of the classroom. This makes sense, because the attributes that appear to be additional traditional academic skills are best gained by interfacing directly with the real world of work.

Accordingly, it may be more useful to build employability factors into existing modules than to create or continue stand-alone modules.



3 Hands-on employability

Accordingly, it is a good idea to consider ways that you can build exposure to workplaces and actual work experience into your course or programme. This may include:

Work placements

- Internships
- Sandwich courses
- Site visits
- Professional mentoring

Entrepreneurship initiatives in which students run real or simulated businesses (see Case Study 1, page 18, for a great example)

As Richard Lambert of the CBI stated when releasing that organisation's 2009 report on employability:

“ Universities and business must do more to meet the pent up demand that exists among students for doing work placements and internships during a degree, and developing the skills they know will be vital in getting a good job after graduation. There's no substitute for experience gained directly on the job and offering placements can be a cost effective route to recruitment. ”

(Universities UK, 2009)

4 Additional helpful measures

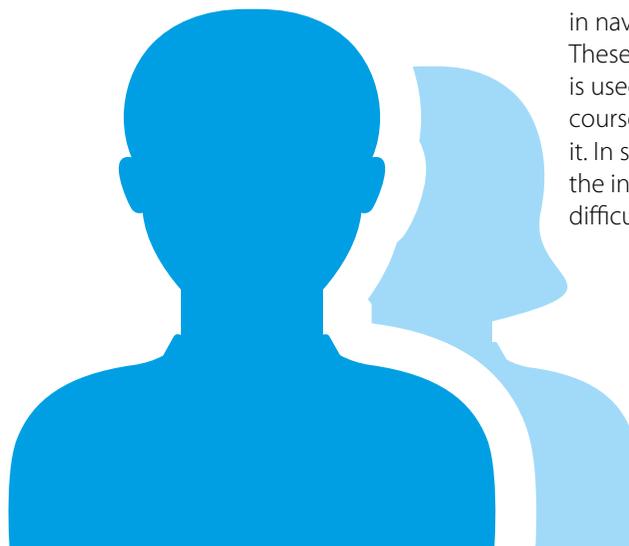
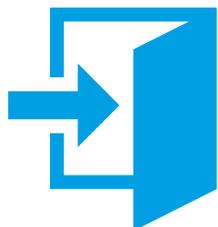
Enquiry or problem-based learning, either individually or in groups, can also address key areas of employability. This can be structured to include experienced of teamwork, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving and project management – precisely the skills that employers say they wish to see in graduates. In some cases the output from these learning experiences can be the prize exhibit in a student portfolio: evidence of what students can do as well as what they know.

Lecturers can also take other steps to increase the amount of exposure students have to professionals in their field, such as:

- Endeavouring to regularly use speakers and Visiting Lecturers from industry
- Contact with professionals through attendance at conferences or talks on campus
- Membership in relevant professional organisations and attending their events
- Ensuring that courses and programmes are, when appropriate, accredited by external professional bodies, such as Skillset, the National Union of Journalists, the Institution of Civil Engineers, and so on

Finally, it is clear that students also value one-to-one discussions about potential career directions and what they need to do to prepare.

They may also need a specialized CV surgery that ensures they accentuate their fitness for posts they plan to apply for, and practice in navigating the kinds of interview processes that they can expect. These differ from field to field. For example, psychometric testing is used by some major employers, and some universities run day courses to help students understand how it works and prepare for it. In some areas of work panel interviews are standard. In still others, the initial pre-employment process is entirely online, which may pose difficulties for some students.



Some university careers services are not always equipped to meet specialised needs, especially for students whose work direction is significantly different than “typical” graduate jobs. Students who will be expected to present a portfolio, for example, may need help from staff who can review their work and make good suggestions on what they should include and how best to present it. Students heading into fields like primary and secondary education or healthcare will also need to be specifically prepared with information about any additional training, licensure requirements, and application processes that they need to be aware of before the end of their course.

Whatever you do, it is crucial that students are able to see what the link is between course elements or distinct employability activities and achievements that employers will value. They need to have the language and confidence to demonstrate what they have learned on their CVs, in job applications, in interviews and in meetings with potential employers at job fairs, conferences and elsewhere. This point is made very clearly in one of the best research papers in the field, *Pedagogy for Employability* (Pegg et al, 2012), which suggests steps like “module learning outcomes making reference to graduate skills, and programme outlines including a mapping grid to illustrate which skills are developed by which modules, highlighting their developmental nature across levels” (p.30).

The other side of employability: Direct work with employers

Employability researchers have also noted that part of the problem lies with employers. Some have cut back their internal training and expect that new hires will have been magically trained at university in organisation-specific work processes.

If you meet directly with major employers, you need to gently point out that university programmes can only provide some of what a new employee needs to know: companies still need to consider how workers will be taught certain parts of the job, perhaps in a trainee post or through ongoing workplace training.

Some employers have misconceptions about what students do at university, and would benefit from more information about what your course covers. They may assume that graduates from elite institutions are always better candidates, for example, and be unaware that some less well-known universities are actually more closely aligned to the job market and change courses quicker to meet demand.

Some employers also need help to recruit a more diverse workforce, and will welcome advice and assistance from universities with experience in this area. They may unintentionally put off applicants by illustrating adverts with photos of workers who are exclusively male, young or white, for example, or by holding recruitment events in venues that disabled applicants cannot access. You will often find allies in employers associations and trades unions, both of which are frequently active on diversity and equality issues.



Activity: Programme/course employability audit

The best way to get started with enhancing your programme or course as regards employability is to conduct an audit. Involve both current and former students in this process to as great an extent as you can: their perspectives and experiences may surprise you, and will certainly provide useful information as you seek to redesign aspects of what and how you teach.

This worksheet provides a basic template for an employability audit. Depending on your subject area, you will need to develop it further to encompass distinctive areas, such as field-specific competencies, career trajectories, and licensing issues.

Graduate employment information

- Do you have a system for regularly keeping in touch with alumni? Yes No
- Do you have solid information on where your graduates from the past 5 years are employed? Yes No
- Is this information available to students? Yes No
- Are up-to-date job profiles available to students? Yes No
- Do staff take stock of industry changes annually when preparing information and activities about careers and career planning? Yes No

Important Tip:

To get the most out of this checklist, involve current students in filling it out and discussing results, not just staff.



Practical experience and exposure

- Do students undertake problem or inquiry-based learning using real-world cases or simulated situations? Yes No
- Are placements, internships or work experience built into your course? Yes No
- If so, do students feed back to their peers about their experiences in any formal way? Yes No
- Do students go on site visits or do field work? Yes No
- Do you have a programme that matches students with professional mentors? Yes No
- Do you regularly bring in speakers from industry to speak for and with students about careers? Yes No
- Are career planning and management skills built into your course in any way? Yes No
- Are there programmes available to students focused on self-employment, entrepreneurship or freelancing, if appropriate? Yes No
- Are students encouraged to try non-UK placement options e.g Erasmus Internships? Yes No
- Are staff members of professional (non-academic) organisations? Yes No
- Are there links between professional associations and your course, other than direct accreditation? Yes No
- Do staff attend professional (non-academic) conferences? Yes No
- Do students attend professional (non-academic) conferences? Yes No
- Is your course accredited by a professional body? Yes No
- If so, are students encouraged and supported to become members of that body before graduation? Yes No

Key skills and competencies

- Are you aware of Key Skills standards set by employers and/or the QAA for the areas of work your students typically enter? Yes No
- Has your course content been explicitly linked to these? Yes No
- Do staff work regularly with employers to ensure course content meets their expectations in terms of key skills and specific competencies? Yes No
- Do you have systems in place to identify and remedy key skills gaps identified via tutorials, coursework, PDP system etc.? Yes No
- Are key skills such as team-working and leadership formally assessed? Yes No

Direct careers help

- Do all students get expert help with writing and revising their CV? Yes No
- Do all students get help with the application process? Yes No
- Do all students have access to mock interviews? Yes No
- Do staff have access to enough information about students and alumni to write accurate and high-quality references? Yes No
- Do you work directly with your university Careers services to ensure it reflects and meets student needs? Yes No
- Does your course have and work with a named Careers advisor? Yes No
- Have you taken steps to identify and meet the needs of students who may have additional barriers to employment:
- Disabled students Yes No
 - Women entering male-dominated fields, and men entering female-dominated fields
 - Black and ethnic minority students
 - Mature students

**Comments:**

Use this space to add information about any employment-related activities you identify that are not listed, and to note details about activities that should be added or developed further.



Employability: Two university programme case studies

Case study 1: Edinburgh College of Art

This award-winning employability initiative (Tickle, 2013) provides a taste of how lecturers working in subjects where there has always been an “employability problem” might help students improve their chances.

Students on the Edinburgh College of Art’s four-year BA (Hons) Graphic Design programme complete all of the usual coursework, but also work with in-house graphic design agencies, for which they do real work for real clients.

The agencies are themselves set up by final-year students, giving them a taste of their next step in a field where freelancing and small, partnership-based businesses are the most typical employment options. Each agency is partnered up with a local professional, who advises the students. These mentoring relationships ensure that students are aware of all the latest issues that may affect their future work, from current tax and contract laws to where graphic arts commissions can be found.

Doing this work is actually part of the programme, not an optional extra. Students are timetabled for one day per week, during which they pitch projects to clients, bid on project tenders, negotiate contracts, do graphic design work, and deal with everyday business issues like communicating with clients, delivering results, making changes and getting paid.

Project briefs are often with public-sector clients, such as the National Blood Transfusion Service, that might otherwise struggle to cover the cost of high-quality graphic design services.

It has been a true success for students. As the university puts it:

“

We pride ourselves on helping graduates to be unique and individual - there is no ‘house style’ - and 100% employable... Our aim is to produce confident and emotive designers who can successfully interpret complex briefs and grasp the subtleties of targeted and effective problem-solving.

(Edinburgh College of Art, 2014)

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Case study 2: Middlesex University

Middlesex University has taken a different approach to employability by basing it within a greatly revamped Careers service. Rather than sticking with the generic approach that previously characterised typical university Careers services, however, in the past year it has moved to an individualized model where students can expect to receive one-to-one help with CVs, cover letters, interview preparation and more.

Offerings include advice for both UK and international students, continued help for alumni, and encouragement for students to beef up their CVs via on – or off-campus voluntary work. There are named Careers officers working directly with each of the university’s large departments. It also has a programme set up specifically for students on its overseas campus in Dubai.

The Middlesex Employability Centre provides a wide variety of sector-specific and general workshops, many of them organised with major employers, employers associations and trade associations.

The Centre has also taken steps to make help more available to busy students, including part-time students who work and disabled students. Help is available in a drop-in centre, by appointment, by phone, by email and via Skype conference; appointments can even be organised via Facebook and Twitter. Webinars and workshops for would-be entrepreneurs are among its most popular offerings.

Its message to students is:

“

81% of employers value employability skills above other factors – including degree or class of degree - so it is important to develop your employability skills while you are at University. The Employability Centre launched in October 2013 with a compelling range of employability services to help you develop your skills and secure that dream job at graduation.

”

(Middlesex University Employability Centre, 2014)



Overcoming barriers to employability

1 Student

Identifying and addressing gaps in skills is an obvious way to help students, regardless of additional factors. The employability audit in this ebook should help you identify student-facing areas that you can improve. Also pay attention to feedback from current and former students that comes in through other methods, such as the National Student Survey. You may pick up employability-related tips that can be used as a basis for further action.

Some students do need direct help with building individual confidence and communication skills, and sometimes issues of etiquette, and appropriate attitudes, dress, speech and behaviour. If you know of talented students who may be held back because of factors like these, take the time to talk about it, perhaps within a private tutorial or PDP session, or pair the student with a professional mentor who can model the right way to present themselves.

2 Institutional

The greatest barriers to employability that are located within education institutions are reputation, location and course content. If your university has had reputation problems in the past, either generally or in relation to the programme you work within, only proactive steps can make a dent. Make direct contact with key employers or organisations and work with them to go through underlying issues.

This process can take time, especially if the issues are long-standing or have been poorly dealt with in the past.

For FE and HE institutions outside of London, competing with those who have a capital advantage can be a problem when so many employers focus their attention there. Think of ways to attract major employers to your campus or town – perhaps through special events or conferences – and use these opportunities to help students make contacts.

But don't neglect the value of local focus – some very successful employability initiatives have come from universities taking the time to identify nearby employment possibilities that they had been unaware of. Local and regional entrepreneurship initiatives can both boost student employability and build a stronger local economy.

3 Employer

Some employers really need help to appreciate the skills, aptitudes and abilities of graduates. They may make unwarranted assumptions based on past experience or media caricatures. Only exposure can erase these, so invite employers in, and get your best students out in the field. Craft and disseminate positive messages about what today's students are capable of.

Some corporate HR systems also create unnecessary barriers for applicants, particularly where students from outside the capital and students with disabilities are concerned. If you, students or alumni identify these, it can be very productive to approach companies directly with constructive suggestions (see also, The other side of employability: Direct work with employers, above).



Important Tip:

Some employers still schedule recruitment events in inaccessible venues. Find out about venues in your area that work well with students with disabilities, and circulate a list to employers and job-fair organisers regularly. Also, get your university Diversity team talking to theirs: direct contact gets results that enable students to succeed.

Maintaining the employability connection

1 Alumni programmes

Employability is mostly about what students do after they have completed your course, so strong connections with alumni are necessary. These will ensure that you have accurate information about student destinations, and that you have a pathway for feedback about how well your former students feel they were prepared. You can use this to further improve. In addition, as alumni move forward in their careers, they are obvious candidates for great industry contacts.

Don't leave this to the university's alumni programme, which may have quite different objectives. There are many low-cost ways you can stay in touch with former students and encourage them to be involved with your courses and in touch about any emerging employability issues they encounter.

2 Continuing professional development and bespoke training

CPD and workplace training are obvious ways to keep in touch as students enter the workplace. You're a known education provider once they leave your doors, so keep them informed about what you can do in the organisations they now work for. Direct work with employees is one of the best venues for staying on top of industry developments and building university-employer relationships.



3 Keep in touch

Alumni Facebook pages and other social media-based contacts can be useful. Even something as simple as giving graduates a university "email address for life" can make a difference. Which looks better at the top of a CV: Jane.Jones@uni.ac.uk, or Hottie1996@yahoo.com? There are other good ways that universities can keep links to alumni strong. For example, Cranfield University has set up an online library service for alumni, making it a regular go-to destination as its graduates, all with postgraduate degrees in mostly technical fields, move into their careers (Wetherill, 2008).

To conclude, not everything we do in further and higher education is about employability, nor should it be. We are also concerned with developing knowledge and developing rounded human beings. However, it is a crucial issue for our students as they move forward in their lives, and requires regular attention from academics as we design, validate, revamp, and run courses.



“Employability and good learning have a lot in common, and should not be seen as oppositional.

Although a student's experience of higher education cannot guarantee a 'graduate level job', the nature of that experience influences the chances of success.”

(Yorke, 2003)

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Resources

[Graduate Prospects:](#)

Work-search and employability advice for graduates (and prospective graduates).

[Higher Education Academy:](#)

HEA Employability Resources.

[Ofsted:](#)

Employability in learning and skills.

For exploring critical perspectives on "employability," the *Ephemera* special issue: "[Giving notice to employability](#)" is excellent.

About the author



Dr Mitzi Waltz has recently embarked on working as a freelance disability consultant, trainer and writer, based in Amsterdam. She was previously Senior Lecturer in Autism Studies at The Autism Centre, Sheffield Hallam University, following five years with the Autism Centre for Education and Research (ACER), University of Birmingham, and a long career as a journalist and journalism educator. She has contributed to many key pieces of autism research and resources, including the DCSF Inclusion Development Programmes on working with children and young people with autism. She has written ten books, the most recent of which is *Autism: A Social and Medical History* (2013, Palgrave Macmillan).

Further reading

[The Lecturer's Guide to Problem-Based and Interactive Learning](#)

[The Global Academic Careers Guide](#)

[7 Skills Every Senior Lecturer Needs](#)



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